CREID WORKING PAPER

Volume 2020 ♦ Number 04 ♦ October 2020

Humanitarianism and Religious Inequalities: Addressing a Blind Spot

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institute of development studies

CREID
Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development

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DOI: 10.19088/CREID.2020.002

ISBN: 978-1-78118-703-6

Available from:
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Charity Registration Number 306371
Charitable Company Number 877338

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Summary

Religious identity is critically important to consider in assessing patterns of displacement and the dynamics of conflict and peace-building, as well as programmatic and policy responses to humanitarian crises. Conflicts are frequently driven by discrimination and generate massive numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as they flee from persecution and violence, whilst individuals or groups may be targeted for their identity or face insecurity during community activities. As a result, the relationship between diversity, inclusivity, and interdependence is key to developing approaches that address intersecting forms of insecurity experienced by religious minorities. This paper reviews current thinking and policy directions in understanding religious inequalities in humanitarian contexts and asks the following questions: 1) What are the implications of programming that is blind to religious inequalities? 2) How can humanitarian actors incorporate sensitivity to religious difference and persecution in their programming, and what are the challenges of doing so?

Keywords: religious minorities; refugees; internally displaced persons (IDPs); humanitarian; intersectionality; conflict.

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Contents

Acronyms

ACT	Action by Churches Together
AGD	age, gender, and diversity
CREID	Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development
DFID	Department for International Development
FBO	faith-based organisations
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
GHO	Global Humanitarian Overview
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
ICC	International Criminal Court
IDP	internally displaced person
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ILAC	International Law and Armed Conflict
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
LARSN	Law and Religion Scholars Network
LDS	Latter-Day Saints
LFA	local faith actors
LFC	local faith communities
LHL	Local Humanitarian Leadership
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MRG	Minority Rights Group
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PI	Principal Investigator
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SOHS	State of the Humanitarian System
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
USAID	United States Aid Agency for International Development
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
WEA	World Evangelical Alliance

Introduction

The world is experiencing an extraordinary era of conflict and humanitarian crises, as the number of armed conflicts around the world, as well as the number of parties fighting in these conflicts, has risen significantly between 2001 and 2020. In the call for the World Humanitarian Summit, the UN recognised that 'the number of people affected by humanitarian crises has almost doubled over the past decade, and is expected to keep rising' (Benedek 2016). By 2019, levels of displacement were the highest on record, with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimating that there were more than 79.5 million forcibly displaced people globally (UNHCR 2020). In 2018 alone, more than 13 million fled war, violence, and persecution, with Syria continuing to have the highest figures, but also significant levels of displacement in other previously more stable contexts including Nigeria and Ethiopia. Not only is the level of displacement at an all-time high, but a growing proportion of refugees are living in protracted situations.

Religious identity is critically important to consider in assessing patterns of displacement and the dynamics of conflict and peace-building, as well as programmatic and policy responses to humanitarian crises. Conflicts are frequently driven by discrimination and generate massive numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as they flee from persecution and violence, whilst individuals or groups may be targeted for their identity or face insecurity during community activities. Research in conflict resolution and international peace-building has found that ignoring dynamics of religious pluralism can become a source of conflict if not addressed sensitively (Schliesser 2020). Further data shows that violence against religious minorities during conflict can also make them vulnerable to further attacks in refugee settings (see USCIRF 2013a, 2013b). A recent review of literature on how the dynamics of urban contexts impact humanitarian responses has similarly identified that 'inequalities frequently correspond to social identities around race, ethnicity or religion' and humanitarian responses can lead to 'the emergence of cities that are divided along these identities' (Brown *et al.* 2015: 14).

The increasing polarisation of societies often underpinned by deep underlying and unresolved tensions between majority and minority groups, have made [religious] minorities particularly vulnerable to violence, persecution, and displacement. Threats to the safety, security, and dignity of individuals, as well as the violation of rights, based on perceived religious difference, are a key dimension of worsening inequality in many political settings, and push many into exploitative relationships to survive (FCO and Wilton Park 2018). Documented instances of religious discrimination, persecution, and violence include systematic and methodical violations committed by various state-

aligned and non-state actors such as terrorism, vigilantism, mass and individual killings, genocide, forcible deportations, ethnic cleansing, the rape and kidnapping of women and selling them into slavery, the destruction and confiscation of property, sexual violence, attacks against converts and those who are alleged to have induced them, and who have encouraged or condoned violence against non-believers and persons belonging to religious minorities.

There is little disaggregated data or statistics on the impact of conflict and crisis on minorities that directly relates to religion. However, the UN Special Rapporteurs on Minority Issues and Freedom of Religion and Belief have previously noted that greater risks are faced by religious minorities both in times of peace and during conflict and post-conflict contexts (UNHRC 2016). In particular, internal displacement disproportionately affects certain communities, including minority groups, whilst individuals or groups may be targeted due to their identity (see El Rajji 2016). The Covid-19 pandemic as the latest crisis is a good example. UN human rights experts (mostly UN Special Rapporteurs) have noted a sharp rise in hatred directed at religious communities, who are often being portrayed as a threat to public safety and national identity (OHCHR 2020, unpaginated). The document further states that,

> minorities and persons facing intersectional discrimination are often portrayed negatively as undermining societal cohesion or as a threat to public safety and national identity and are frequently subjected to acts of violence. We are concerned that States may also use religion as a means of shaping and reinforcing narrow concepts of national identity or violating other human rights and undermining gender equality. Not only does this destroy the space for rational discourse, but it seeks to polarise and homogenise rather than foster respect for diversity and pluralism.
> (*ibid.*)

There is no linear pathway moving from recognition of religious diversity to inclusivity of those on the margins. Programming and policy must move beyond narrower aims to protect religious minorities from violence and uphold their human rights. The relationship between diversity, inclusivity, and interdependence is key to developing approaches that address intersecting forms of insecurity experienced by religious minorities (Tadros 2019). Doing so will promote social cohesion, uphold human dignity in conflict and displacement contexts, and ultimately contribute to peace-building.

This paper reviews current thinking and policy directions in understanding religious inequalities in humanitarian contexts. Based on a review of scholarly and grey literatures

on religious inequalities and humanitarianism, a discourse analysis of key global humanitarian policy reports, and the position of faith-based humanitarian networks at the 2016 World Humanitarian Forum, it addresses the following questions: Does humanitarian assistance recognise in its architecture that conflict and even humanitarian assistance affects communities and individuals differently according to intersecting identities (i.e. being a member of a religious minority and being a political dissident, or a member of a religious minority and a woman)? What are the implications of programming that is blind to religious inequalities? How can humanitarian actors incorporate sensitivity to religious difference and persecution in their programming, and what are the challenges of doing so?

The report is divided into three key sections. The first section explores how religious marginalisation is best understood through the rights of minorities and other key legal instruments, while the second section highlights the need for this rather limited legal understanding to evolve in the light of current humanitarian challenges linked to religious marginalisation. The third section then examines three interrelated major factors which explains why religious marginalisation is still being ignored.

1 Humanitarianism and freedom of religion and belief: conceptual tensions and policy conundrums

Reverend Majed El Shafie (2013) explains that the vast majority of challenges faced by religious minorities can fall into three categories:

1 The threats from secular authoritarian regimes, which monitor, regulate, and control religious practice and expression within their boundaries and suppress any unauthorised practice;
2 Cases of religious dominance that may involve a state favouring a majority religion while discriminating against minority religions;
3 A category often but not necessarily linked to the second, namely the treatment of religious minorities in conflict or post-conflict situations.

The rights of religious minorities go beyond freedom of religion and belief and non-discrimination. The violations faced by religious minorities lie at the intersection of a number of realities, including the state's religion or ideology relationship, the state's demographic makeup, the constitutional and legislative framework, the personal status laws, intercommunal and communal relationships, and the role of non-state actors (UNGA 2017).

In 2013, Rita Izsák, the then UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, considered that,

> globally the rights of religious minorities are poorly implemented in practice, and that in all regions, they face discrimination, social exclusion, marginalisation and in many instances harassment, persecution and violence. (…) (and that) far greater attention must be given to the rights of religious minorities in the framework of minority rights, which require positive actions on the part of States to protect and promote their rights.
> (UNGA 2013)

This statement is important in that minority rights thereby constitute the most important global legal framework to protect the rights of religious minorities. This is in line with previous research. Ghanea (2012) wrote on how minorities have always been assumed to be part and parcel of the minorities' regime normatively, but have, in fact, rarely been protected through it. Governments and external actors often fail to understand the role

that minority rights plays in both the origin and resolution of identity-based conflicts (King and Samii 2018).

Another important issue is the relationship between discrimination on the basis of religious identity and inequality, as emphasised by the UN Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Religion (UNGA 2018). Systematic and entrenched discrimination stems from different facets of identity, including religion, in many humanitarian contexts. In the human rights framework, freedom of religion cannot be isolated from the general principle of equality. In other words, because human rights are indivisible, measures to remedy religious discrimination must be coordinated with measures to remedy other types of discrimination, such as racial, sexual, gender, education, and employment discrimination. The rule of law therefore has a key role to play in that it is an impartial moderator. This means, for instance, that all human beings are equal before the law, in their rights and in their duties, and that there must therefore be no discrimination between them (Davies and Hoffler 2016). The overall question here becomes how the global community should address this relationship discrimination on the basis of religious identity and inequality.

Framing religious vulnerability as part of the wider human rights lexicon and allowing for intersecting vulnerabilities to be addressed through aid provision, may be productive in unpacking the complexities behind religious persecution and discrimination. The United States Aid Agency for International Development (USAID) has been particularly active in thinking about this specific issue, especially in relation to Iraq. At the 2018 US Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, Mark Green outlined the rationale behind the USAID approach:

> We believe that religious pluralism, which is part of a cultural mosaic, we believe it is worth preserving as a matter of development, as well as an expression of our values. The starting point is the human need, and the ending point is the development of a new operational response to protect the dignity and security of people. More generically, the emphasis would be on programming that reduces people's vulnerability, mitigates threats to their security or strengthens their capacity to cope with or contest these threats and risks. Additionally, we would propose that humanitarians engage with protection issues at the preventative stage, pressing much harder for political solutions at the early stages of violations, before sporadic clashes, violence and abuse calcify into intractable situations of destruction.
> (quoted in DuBois 2018)

Thus, there is a growing recognition by humanitarian stakeholders of the need to address religious marginalisation and exclusions arising from discrimination and inequality (see the recent FCO and Wilton Park report 2018). The following section examines how international humanitarian law and current global policy dynamics approach religious marginalisation.

2 Religious marginalisation, international humanitarian law, and current global policy dynamics

Humanitarian principles are central to establishing and maintaining access to affected populations and pre-empt such negative or exploitative survival strategies.

Humanitarian principles

- *Humanity:* Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being.
- *Impartiality:* Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of humanitarian need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, religious beliefs, class, or political opinions.
- *Neutrality:* Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature.
- *Independence*: Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military, or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

Source: OCHA (2012).

The principle of impartiality is described by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as an understanding that 'humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions' (OCHA 2012: 2). As Avis (2019: 2) notes,

> whilst these principles are long established, challenges in terms of their application and interpretation have beset the humanitarian community complicated by the complexity of contemporary humanitarian contexts. Interpretations of these principles also has particular relevance when considering the challenges that religious minorities face in accessing humanitarian assistance.

The support for these principles among the humanitarian practitioner community is quite clear. Of the 1,170 practitioners who completed the State of the Humanitarian System (SOHS) 2018 survey (ALNAP 2018), a large number were fairly positive about the degree to which their agencies and operations followed these principles: 82 per cent said that their agencies were good or excellent in following the principle of humanity; 75 per cent responded good or excellent with respect to impartiality; 73 per cent with respect to neutrality; and 68 per cent with respect to independence. A significant majority of those who discussed the principles felt that they were relevant and important to humanitarian action.

Interviewees working in situations of conflict – as well as a number of key informants – made the point that the principles are not only a value system, but also an important operational tool. In the words of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) manager: 'Losing impartiality, neutrality, would be the worst mistake we humanitarians could make… we have access to places only because we do good work and people know we don't have a political position' (quoted in ALNAP 2018: 216). Some interviewees (albeit a relatively small number) specifically questioned the principle of neutrality. One Lebanese local NGO explained:

> I think we have to be impartial, being neutral paralyses us. Being neutral places you in zero, and that is paralysing. Being impartial does not paralyse you but you have a position, you have a voice, you have something to say. Some [international non-governmental organisations] INGOs say they are neutral. Well we are not, we are impartial, we are in favour of the families, the victims, which does not leave me at zero. I have a position, I have a discourse.
> (Saavedra 2016: 40)

These interviewees tended to be involved in explicitly political social justice work advocating for the rights of marginalised ethnic or caste groups. Some faith-based organisations (FBOs) question the so-called neutrality of humanitarian workers, arguing that the human rights focus of secular humanitarian NGOs is regarded not as neutral, but as related to western secular ideology (ACT Alliance 2016). A recent study by Carpi and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020) on the roles of faith and secularism in Syrian diaspora organisations in Lebanon confirm this finding.

The problem of religious marginalisation in humanitarian policy is approached through the general idea of the protection of individuals, which is a pillar principle in the humanitarian system. In terms of international humanitarian law, this principle is reflected in the concept of non-discrimination, which ensures that all persons are treated

equally. In addressing the treatment of individuals in times of war, international humanitarian law forbids any adverse distinction to be made on the basis of 'race, colour, sex, language, religion or belief, political or other opinion, national or social origin, wealth, birth or other status, or on any other similar criteria' (API Art. 9, APII Art. 2, GCI–IV Common Art. 3, GCI and GCII Art. 12, GIII Art. 16, and GCIV Art. 13).[1] The Statute of the International Criminal Court (adopted 17 July 1998) further details the list by adding 'age' and 'ethnic origin' and replacing 'sex' with 'gender' (Art. 21.3 of ICC Statute).[2]

This focus by the humanitarian system on the protection of individuals may be problematic with respect to religious marginalisation. Nigel Timmins, humanitarian director at Oxfam (quoted in Gingerich *et al.* 2017: 37) argues that humanitarian organisations are largely founded on humanist principles, including human rights, which tend to be focused on the role and the prioritisation of the individual, while many religious traditions start from the perspective of the collective body, creating 'a perspective gap between these actors' vis à vis legitimacy, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. DuBois (2018) also rallies against the formal operational model of humanitarian aid provision which 'goes about its business by separating humanity from people affected by crisis, reducing the latter to stereotypes of victimhood devoid of that intensely human trait, agency' (DuBois 2018: 9).

As a result of the issues raised above, religious discrimination, inequalities, and marginalisation are now in fact being increasingly raised and discussed in global policy circles. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated its commitment to the appropriate treatment of religious beliefs and practices, particularly by identifying and protecting the needs and rights of religious minorities, and hosted its first meeting in December 2012 in Geneva to discuss religion and refugee protection. At this meeting, it was stated that one of the challenges now and in the future is 'working in multi-religious humanitarian settings where displaced communities belong to different religious groups' (Guterres 2012: 1). This can mostly be explained by several large humanitarian crises where religious inequalities and marginalisation came to the forefront: Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea.

The issue of religious marginalisation is not just limited to rights of religious minorities. It is also about how humanitarian actors can engage with religious and spiritual needs and freedom so that religious practices are not marginalised. In fact, this issue received more attention in the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) and the State of the Humanitarian

[1] See www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0321.pdf.

[2] See www.icc-cpi.int/resource-library/documents/rs-eng.pdf.

System (SOHS) reports, and religious-based humanitarian networks submissions to the 2016 World Humanitarian Forum than the rights of religious minorities. This focus can be partly explained by the difficulties encountered during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa (2013–16) relating to the handling of safe burials and preventive measures to address contamination. For many humanitarian agencies that responded to the epidemic, this was a new type of emergency demanding 'innovative thinking' (Adams, Lloyd and Miller 2015: 16) and presenting 'unprecedented challenges and risks for which… [the] multi-sector emergency model was not well adapted' (UNICEF 2017: 53).

Initially, many humanitarian agencies (such as Oxfam, for instance) struggled to identify priority needs in terms of support to safe burials. The initial response demonstrated the shortcomings of an overly technical approach that relied on external expertise at the expense of the knowledge and understanding of the societies facing the epidemic. This meant, for example, that '[t]he early instructions on so-called safe burial – rigid and unworkable – were, in that context, a textbook manual for unsafe burial that then had to be overcome by working with local religious and community leaders' (DuBois and Wake 2015: 31). In that context at least, seeing people's behaviour as a problem, rather than as a key to the response, hampered effective action and cost lives (DuBois and Wake 2015; Moon *et al.* 2015; IRC 2016). As a result, NGOs found greater community adherence to humanitarian best practices by integrating greater religious sensitivity into their work, enabling them to have the ability to affect behaviour change, disseminate information, and preach acceptance to combat stigmatisation and address various forms of inequalities.

The next section will examine to what extent these policy perspectives and concerns are shaping humanitarian debates and practices.

3 Religious marginalisation and humanitarian practitioners

Mark Lowcock, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, wrote in a foreword to the Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) report, 'I saw families forced to flee their homes and walk for weeks to find safety from armed conflict or persecution based on their ethnicity and religious beliefs' (OCHA 2018: 6). Yet even though the significance of religious inequalities and persecution based on religious identity is increasingly recognised by humanitarian actors, religious marginalisation is mostly ignored in humanitarian reports, including the GHO and the SOHS. This section explores three reasons why religious marginalisation is ignored: 1) the institutional architecture of the global humanitarian system built around secular principles, 2) a depoliticisation of conflicts in line with the neutrality principle, and 3) the taboo around religious identity. Each of these are reviewed in turn below.

3.1 A secular global humanitarian architecture?

The first reason why religious marginalisation is ignored relates to the secular basis of the global humanitarian architecture. This may be slightly surprising as the origins of humanitarianism have had a close relationship with religion (Barnett and Stein 2012). Whether focused on ancient writings regarding obligations to others, the religious views and backgrounds of key humanitarian figures of the nineteenth century such as Henri Dunant or Florence Nightingale, or during the interwar period, which witnessed the role of religious missionaries in establishing international human rights conventions, to the establishment of faith-based organisations (FBOs) such as World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, or Islamic Relief, faith is acknowledged to have been a determining influence on the development of humanitarian thought and practice (Moorehead 1999; Ferris 2005, 2011; Bucar and Barnett 2005; Barnett and Weiss 2008; Calhoun 2008; Walker and Maxwell 2009).

However, from the late nineteenth century and gathering pace through the twentieth, the codification of humanitarian principles and law, accompanied by the institutionalisation of humanitarian actors and accountabilities, saw the establishment of a distinctively secular humanitarian regime (Calhoun 2008; Walker and Maxwell 2009). With non-governmental actors increasingly enmeshed within intergovernmental structures and governmental agendas, the principles and policies of humanitarianism were increasingly articulated in secular terms. As a result, functional secularism frames the discourse of contemporary humanitarianism. Significant research to date has analysed the continued

secularisation of the humanitarian regime (Calhoun 2008; Walker and Maxwell 2009; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Wilkinson 2018).

This secular and 'neutral' framing, however, in effect marginalises religious discourse and action in humanitarian policy and practice. Recent research in fact shows that FBOs feel 'alienated' and/or as if they work in 'parallel systems' in relation to the global humanitarian system (see Gingerich *et al.* 2017). One of the main sources of unease on the part of secular international humanitarian actors in their engagement with local faith actors – and their support of them as partners and local humanitarian leaders – is local faith actors' (LFAs') provision of spiritual assistance and concerns around impartiality and proselytism (Wilkinson, de Wolf and Alier 2019). Some FBOs have been reflexive about their past practices, recognising that they have been seen as basing aid on conforming to religiously defined roles and are now changing to adhere to some of the key humanitarian principles, especially in relation to the principle of neutrality (WEA 2015; ACT Alliance 2016).

While FBOs can (and do) respond to humanitarian needs on the ground, they are only 'allowed' to do so under strict conditions – for instance, by adapting the language of their institutions to secular methods and by working in neutral terms, which means marginalising the role of religious practice, values, and experience in shaping their work (*ibid.*). These conditions are set by the linguistic fields of humanitarianism and are revealed through the structures of the FBOs themselves. In other words, in order to be given legitimacy by humanitarian actors, some FBOs adapt to and reproduce secular linguistic fields that will give them legitimacy.

Given the widely held assumptions that religion is a form of divisive identity politics and/or a non-essential feature of humanitarianism, many of the respondents stressed that, by avoiding religion, they were being loyal to the core principles of humanitarian work – those of neutrality and universality. This desire for neutrality was expressed as a form of impartiality that required the limitation, or for some interviewees, the entire absence of, religion in humanitarianism. All UNHCR staff interviewed as well as the majority of non-UNHCR actors, including Christian and Islamic FBOs, referenced these principles. As a Caritas staff member (anonymous) stated:

> UNHCR does not shed light on Christians because it's a general crisis. Who is the most vulnerable? A refugee is a refugee. They [UNHCR] are neutral. We should all be neutral. It's what our work should be.
> (quoted in Eghdamian 2016: 455)

Similarly, three staff from Islamic Worldwide Relief on separate occasions referenced non-discrimination and impartiality in their interviews. For two charity officers from the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) Church interviewed in Amman but based in Irbid, religion was not viewed as a concern for their work, and they expressed that it should not matter for UNHCR either:

> The subject of religion never comes up in our work. We don't know the religion of our beneficiaries. It doesn't matter to us. And why should UNHCR care about religion? I mean, sure, we rarely see anyone who is not Muslim. But really, no one cares what the religion of a person is. It's a principle of charity—we should not discriminate.
> (Patrick and Susan Farley, Charity Officers for the Latter-Day Saints Church, Humanitarian Responses Unit, Jordan quoted in Eghdamian 2016: 455)

Humanitarian faith-based organisations, in particular the World Evangelical Alliance, Action by Churches Together (ACT Alliance), and Islamic Relief, have particularly focused on improving the acceptance and understanding among the international community of the unique value of FBOs, by arguing that local faith communities (LFCs) are universally present and are frequently the only functioning civil society in humanitarian settings, but that their overall potential often remains untapped (WEA 2015; ACT Alliance 2016; Islamic Relief 2016). These organisations consider that LFCs are inadequately represented at the planning and coordination table due to the distrust of secular and institutional donors and their scalability remains unexplored.

The discourse goes further in the sense that global humanitarian policy declarations (such as the Grand Bargain and Local Humanitarian Leadership, LHL) now emphasise local humanitarian leadership and ownership, and so their argument goes that seeking to put local actors at the centre of humanitarian response inevitably means closer working relations with faith groups (Anglican Communion News Service 2016). Christian humanitarian organisations are therefore pushing for improving the connection between the high-level UN and Intergovernmental Agendas and the ongoing work of the local and international churches, using FBOs as a conduit for dialogue so that the secular framing of humanitarianism no longer acts as a barrier in assisting those communities. The issue is powerfully summarised by Jim Ingram, the CEO of EU-CORD Member Medair, who declared in April 2016:

> The simple fact is that most humanitarian agencies are rooted in the global North, typically within more secularised societies, but they predominantly serve populations in the global South who have a persistent religious affiliation. How can

> secular humanitarians best serve and speak to people of faith, especially when those people are in crisis? It is in times of crisis when faith helps people who are suffering hold onto hope. We need to move past the entrenched fear of FBOs as proselytising missionary organisations, and move towards deepening our understanding of how faith in all its forms impacts different communities and affects humanitarian programming.
>
> To make this happen we need to learn better ways to communicate with local faith communities. This will require new skills of our humanitarian actors and staff. It will demand more than simply knowing about differing world views and religious beliefs, with the underlying aim of quickly proceeding to the secular humanitarian agenda. It will require that we all learn new and better ways of engaging with those whom we disagree.
> (quoted in Milburn 2016, unpaginated)

Islamic Relief emphasised that Muslim FBOs can help to address the financial gap to cover humanitarian needs (Islamic Relief 2016). The narrative is that the Islamic model can provide financial and institutional sustainability, local accountability, and influence. The model is built on the belief in fulfilling duties to communities, both local and elsewhere, and on the tradition that beneficiaries have a right to your wealth – it is not a question of charity, but rather an obligation. Some statistics reinforced the importance of these organisations, as 75 per cent of crises in the last 15 years have taken place in Muslim-majority contexts, so Muslim fundraising and local organisations are critical to responses.

These calls resulted in the Charter for Faith-Based Humanitarian Action, which was endorsed at the World Humanitarian Summit by more than 160 FBOs and religious leaders, representing all major faith traditions and different geographical regions. UN agencies and governments have also created new institutions and policies to deal with faith-based organisations. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) acts as the Coordinator of the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations. In his address at the Vatican on 22 February 2016, UN OCHA Under-Secretary-General Stephen O'Brien noted the 'unique relationship that faith-based groups have built with communities, which makes them well-equipped to contribute to the shifts required to put vulnerable people at the centre of global decision-making' (OCHA 2016). The British government has developed the Faith Partnership Policy, which seeks to better engage with FBOs. However, new research shows that these new policies and initiatives, four years later, have not produced much change in the ways that the global humanitarian system is working (see Wilkinson 2020) and the promotion of

freedom of belief and religious equality for the marginalised still remains the key missing identifier.

3.2 Religious inequalities: the missing identifier

Religion and inequalities are not considered together in the global humanitarian reports. The issue of inequalities is mentioned and discussed in the GHO report but essentially from a gender perspective, the focus being on crises (whether conflicts or natural disasters) exacerbating gender inequalities, particularly against women and girls (OCHA 2018: 17). In the SOHS 2018 report, the word 'inequalities' is mentioned just once, again as a factor that has an influence on the humanitarian system: 'the humanitarian sector is closely entwined with the broader global situation. Political and economic decisions are the causes of many crises, and political and economic inequalities have a strong influence on who is affected' (ALNAP 2018: 38). The report argues further down the line that some specific protection challenges, for instance, are embedded in deep-seated cultural attitudes towards issues such as power, gender, and ethnicity (*ibid*: 188).

However, structural institutional issues are barely addressed, leading to statements that 'to reverse the trend of increasing vulnerability to protracted and recurrent crises – and thereby enabling progress towards the [sustainable development goals] SDGs – requires a concerted effort that goes beyond improved humanitarian action' (OCHA 2018: 21). The SOHS 2018 report nonetheless recognises that

> humanitarian action itself is an exercise of a type of power: the ability of those with means – governments, organisations or individuals – to support those in need. In this context, vocabulary matters. The words used to describe a situation can obscure injustices and inequalities, deny the dignity and agency of people in crisis and (perhaps more helpfully) betray biases and assumptions.
> (ALNAP 2018: 38)

However, despite this reflexivity, the politics behind conflicts is still ignored, meaning that issues of religious marginalisation are relegated in considering the extent of humanitarian needs and responses at scale (FCO and Wilton Park 2018). As El Rajji (2016: 15) documents with regard to the conflict in Yemen and its impact on religious minorities, 'In Yemen, existing patterns of discrimination before the outbreak of the current conflict have been deepened in a context of instability, violence and protracted humanitarian crisis'.

3.3 Religious identity: a taboo?

There is a deeply ingrained view amongst humanitarian stakeholders that religion is a personal rather than public matter and one that must be avoided in order to maintain their secular disposition (which is associated with impartiality in the minds of many) (see Wilkinson 2018). This means that reports by UNHCR and other humanitarian actors are not covering certain key demographic features, particularly understating (and often entirely omitting) the religious affiliations of refugees. This can be surprising as the agencies have relatively comprehensive data and analysis in relation to the ages and gender of registered refugees, as well as health conditions, school enrolments, and material needs, including shelter and sanitation (see UNHCR 2014b, 2015). The updated Sphere Handbook explicitly addresses the value of disaggregated data, acknowledging that, 'Groups may be under-served and discriminated against because of nationality, ethnicity, language, or religious or political affiliation, which requires special attention to reflect the principle of impartiality' (Sphere Association 2018: 12). Not only is disaggregated data not in conflict with humanitarian principles, but it has programmatic benefits for addressing particular vulnerabilities as 'disaggregated data can help to identify those people most at risk, indicate whether they are able to access and use humanitarian assistance, and where more needs to be done to reach them' (*ibid.*: 12).

The UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity (2018: 10) also recognises the value of disaggregated data:

> Accurate population data is indispensable to inclusive programming. If data is disaggregated by age, gender, and diversity, the impact of UNHCR's programmes in ensuring protection for different population groups can be monitored and assessed, and course corrections implemented accordingly. Also, disaggregated data helps inform the scope and target of specific programmes.

Religious minority status is included as a diversity characteristic that can lead groups to

> experience discrimination and marginalization. They are frequently excluded from participation and encounter obstacles to expressing their identity, factors which are compounded in displacement. They are likely to be affected both by the immediate events leading to their displacement and by the long-term legacy of discrimination. (*ibid.*: 19)

In light of this, UNHCR lists 'AGD-Inclusive Programming' as the first of the ten obligatory core actions: 'At a minimum, all data collected by UNHCR will be disaggregated by age and sex and by other diversity considerations, as contextually appropriate and possible,

for purposes of analysis and programming' (UNHCR 2018: 9). However, most publicly released UNHCR data do not include such diversity considerations, leaving gaps in analysis and programming.

A study on Christian and Druze religious minorities refugees living in Jordan, describes how UNHCR was constructing a 'Secular, Material and Homogenous Refugee' (Eghdamian 2016: 452). All UNHCR staff interviewed in Jordan by Eghdamian (2016) emphasised the importance of physical and material needs for Syrian refugees, including finances, shelter, and health. This narrow approach needs to be expanded to include other non-material needs and there is therefore a need to integrate a broader intersectional approach to religious inequality in humanitarian response to address these challenges.

4 Conclusion

This report has shown that in any given crisis or conflict, the Covid pandemic being the latest illustration, different forms of identities including religious ones and vulnerabilities can lead to marginalisation. The relationship between diversity, inclusivity, and interdependence is key to developing approaches that address intersecting forms of insecurity experienced by religious minorities. This is slowly being recognised by the global humanitarian agencies, but recent policy initiatives have not resulted in substantial change in humanitarian practices. The overall technical approach followed by these agencies means that the intersecting forms of identities are not recognised and acknowledged, but the interpretation of human rights should enable to put forward, rather than suppress, these multiple forms of identities.

Although targeting on the basis of belonging to a marginalised religious minority is not new, religious minorities do not always fare well in humanitarian settings which fail to engage with the realities they face, as they either cannot or do not want to respond to them in terms reflective of religious beliefs and difference. While religious marginalisation and protection are dealt with within human rights frameworks and international legal conventions, programming and policy has historically not – in neither humanitarian, nor development settings – engaged with protecting religious minorities from violence (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020). Overall, as argued in this paper, the response to religious marginalisation has been limited due to the secular nature of the institutional architecture of the global humanitarian system, and the taboo around religious identity. The genesis of the humanitarian system shows that it has adopted a language that both excludes religion and inequalities as part of its lexicon, as a particular (western/secular) interpretation of humanitarian principles holds sway in much humanitarian practice. As a result, the needs of marginalised communities are often left unaddressed, and the capacities of religious actors as partners in humanitarian actions remain untapped.

There are many research gaps in the current academic scholarship and policy framing around religious pluralism in the context of humanitarianism. There are of course key debates about the complexity of the issue and its semantics as discussed in this report, but the shape of what appropriate responses to the problems and challenges actually looks like is far less clear. The solution may lie in developing a broader intersectional approach in order to identify religious inequality in humanitarian response. This will ensure that programmatic responses are developed to pursue better linkages of human rights frameworks with local dynamics and political realities concerning the situation of religious minorities.

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